

## TAKING IT OFF

Designer Maria Chen's alternative boldness.

Those lured into Mulberry Street's *a + a company* by the alluring garments displayed in the window will be led on a journey of mistaken identities. Filled with London designer Maria Chen's asymmetrical, hand-dyed organza dresses and druidic coats—a cross between Yohji Yamamoto, Morgane Le Fay and Isabel Toledo (with whom she worked)—as well as her more street-specific fare, like one-sleeved T-shirts, the photographs on the walls are the only tipoff that this is in fact an art gallery, and Chen's designs are indeed a display. Chen herself is not British, but Taiwanese by way of St. Louis. And though her clothes are accomplished and beautifully executed, the 23-year-old is still finishing her MA at London's prestigious St. Martin's.

Chen, who worked as a gallery assistant at *a + a* while studying at Parsons, is part of a London/New York collective that includes designers, stylists, photographers, artists and musicians whose work can be regularly seen in magazines like *The Face* and *i.d.* And while a brilliant fashion career is clearly within her reach, Chen is most intrigued by expanding the line between art and fashion. "I'm trying to achieve a higher aesthetic without being contrived," she says over breakfast at nearby Cafe Gitane. "Clothes are still clothes—you have to be able to wear them." While the pieces in her first collection, "Opposites," were made to look good hanging as sculptures, they are also beautiful on the body, hanging in an entirely different way. "Asymmetry is always part of what I do," she says. "It's a mind-set, not a trend. It's about finding an alternative balance."

Maria Chen's work can be seen at 236 Mulberry St. \*

BY CHRISTINE MUHLKE



Now & Chen

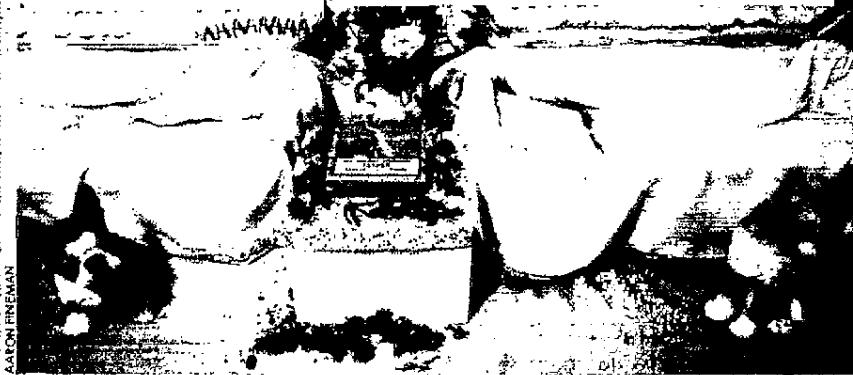
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NEWS

*A fond farewell to four-legged friends*

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## ANIMAL RITES

Mourning at the city's first pet funeral home.

**T**hey played the theme from *Cats* at Isis' wake. She was laid on her side in a pink casket with her head on a cushion. Ten people, mostly family, showed up to pay their respects and stroke her sandy brown hair one final time. After an hour of mingling and sniffing, Father John read selections from Genesis about the creation of animals and the adventures of Noah, and recalled Isis as a loyal, compassionate friend in his eulogy.

Isis, a bairn terrier, was by no means a toy dog, but small enough to fit easily under a flower bed in someone's backyard. At All Pets Go to Heaven, she didn't have to suffer the indignity of the shoebox.

"Soon as the pet dies, you're not supposed to grieve. It's a pet. You'll get another one," said funeral director Raymond Leone in his office adjoining the parlor where Isis was getting her send-off. "But it's not like that here. It's like an unknown soldier.... Why do they memorialize him? Because he deserved it. Same thing with a pet."

Dogs, cats, birds, an assortment of rodents and a horse have faced the unknown in-style with Leone's help since he opened in Carroll Gardens four months ago. Like an inverse Dr. Doolittle, he offers pet owners the kind of professional grieving services previously reserved for the human species: burials, cremations, wakes, memorial services and family counseling, at prices ranging from \$95 up to \$1,000. Taking animal death beyond the pet cemetery, he sells personalized memorials, custom monuments and a growing line of ceramic statuette urns for \$10 to \$350, as well as caskets ranging from a \$1,500 handmade mahogany number to a \$10 plastic tub for hamsters. Marianne, Isis' owner, opted to place her dog's ashes in a romanesque urn (befitting her divine namesake, an Egyptian goddess imported by the Romans), which will be placed in her own grave when she dies.

Maybe it's a sign that pet dating has gotten way out of hand in this country. Or it could be an idea whose time has come. Whatever the case, it's only fitting that All Pets should spring up in Carroll Gardens. Funeral homes are as much a part of the vernacular of this Italian neighborhood as Virgin Mary yard statues and old men in Members Only jackets. But the death industry has been dying here in the two decades since the waterfront shut down and younger, rootless folks have moved in to replace the natives. Leone rattled off seven parlors that have closed down in recent memory, and blamed national chains for buying out many of the remaining establishments.

Leone has no intention of selling off his other (human) funeral home in Park Slope, and certainly won't part with All Pets. His new venture does two to four wakes and eight to ten cremations each week, and business is growing. In the next year and a half, Leone plans to open branches on the Upper East Side and Staten Island and will eventually license the idea throughout the nation.

"We've created something now, and we can't say 'alright, we're gonna stop here,' because too many people want this type of service," he said. In the next room, Father John had already left, and Isis' wake was winding down. Marianne, a little shaken and teary-eyed, came into the office to go over last-minute details about the cremation with Leone. She told me how Isis was especially important to her this past year, after her husband died, and she wouldn't think of saying good-bye any other way.

"There are a lot of us who love our pets like they were our children, and she was my daughter," she said. "For 12 years I told people, 'I have three boys and one girl.' It's a wonderful thing he's doing." \*

BY STEVE WILSON

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